

THE OPERATIONS OF THE FIRST BATTALION, 16th INFANTRY

(THE FIRST UNITED STATES INFANTRY DIVISION)

IN THE ATTACK ON HILL 523, 29-30 APRIL 1943.

(TUNISIA CAMPAIGN)

(Personal experience of
a Rifle Platoon Leader)

Type of operation: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Index	1
Introduction	2
Topography	3
Advance of the First Battalion in the "Northern Campaign"	5
The Plan for the Attack on Hill 523	6
The Attack on Hill 523	9
The German Counterattack of Hill 523	17
Analysis and Criticism	23
Lessons Learned	24
Bibliography	25
Map, Tunisia. 1:2,000,000	Tab A
Map, II Corps Planned Zone of Advance. Approx. 1:1,000,000	Tab B
Map, Sidi Rherid-Sidi Msir-Hill 609-Hill 523 Area. 1:50,000	Tab C
Map, Hill 523-Hill 609 Area. Approx. 1:10,000	Tab D

INTRODUCTION

"--Now he decided it was better to die fighting. With two of his platoons he marched up the hill through the fire on that ridge and crossed over the ridge. Those two platoons and the colonel were not heard from again.--" (1)

This monograph deals with the capture of the hill mentioned above. It was Hill 523*, located in northern Tunisia, and the unit capturing it was the First Battalion of the 16th Infantry, a regiment which is a part of The First Infantry Division. (2)

The First Division landed at Oran, Algeria, in the initial North African landings in November 1942, and from Algeria went east to Tunisia to take part in what members of the division refer to as the "Early Campaign" -- meaning the fighting which took place in the early days of the Tunisian Campaign in the Ousseltia Valley, Faïd Pass, and Kasserine Pass in January and February of 1943. (Tab A) The "Early Campaign" was followed by the "Southern Campaign" -- the fighting which took place in March and April in the southern part of Tunisia starting with the seizure of Gafsa and ending with the battle of El Guettar. (3)

For the fighting in the "Southern Campaign", as well as for the remainder of the Tunisian Campaign, the First Division was a part of the II U. S. Corps. While the fighting of the "Southern Campaign" was taking place, the British First Army was fighting the Germans in the north and western part of Tunisia, and the British Eighth Army was hammering the Afrika Korps at the Mareth Line trying to break into southeastern Tunisia. Following the defeat the II Corps dealt the Germans at El Guettar, and the rapid break-through of the Mareth Line by the Eighth Army, the Germans were rapidly chased up the coast line of Tunisia by the Eighth Army to

(1) A-1, p. 26. *Elevation in meters. Maps of this area were copied from French maps which gave the elevation of each hill, thus the identification of hills by number. (2) A-2. (3) A-3, p. 9&10; A-4, p. 173-182; A-3, p. 28.

the hills north of Sousse. (4)

When the Battle of El Guettar ended on 9 April, the Southern Campaign came to an end and the U. S. II Corps made a wide swing of about two hundred miles from the south of Tunisia, and moving in rear of the British First Army, went into position in the northern part of Tunisia to take part in what the men of the First Division called the "Northern Campaign". (Tab B) In the planned zone of action of II Corps in the "Northern Campaign", the 34th Division was on the left of the First Division, and the 1st Armored Division was on the right. On 21 April the 16th Infantry, in Division reserve, moved into positions about 8 to 10 miles northeast of Beja along the Beja - Mateur road. The First Battalion of the 16th Infantry occupied the high ground to the east of a small Arab settlement named Sidi Rherib*. (5)

TOPOGRAPHY

The planned zone of action for the 16th Infantry in the "Northern Campaign", as well as that for the whole First Division and the II Corps, contained rugged hill country. The word "hill" is used conservatively. Perhaps "mountain" would more accurately describe the terrain. This rough country was mostly barren. Trees and underbrush of any type were virtually unknown. The soil was poor and mostly rocky, and the "hills" often rose so steeply they were almost cliffs. (6)

The slopes of the hills supported some grass which was used by the native Arabs as goat pasture. In the lowlands between the hills there would occasionally appear an Arab hut or two, these surrounded by a grain field or a small cactus or olive grove. At infrequent intervals there would appear a more European type of farm with several dwellings and out-

(4) A-3, p. 32-36. *Sidi is the Arabic for village or settlement.

(5) My own observations; A-5, p. 4. (6) My own observations; A-5, p. 11-12.

buildings, and these were usually run by farmers of French, Italian, or Spanish extraction.

The key terrain feature in this area was Djebel Tahent*, more popularly known as Hill 609. (Tab C) Projecting from the base of Hill 609 were many other hills, - Hills 523, 531, 490, and 461, all of which actually were shoulders of Hill 609. However, before the Hill 609 area could be reached, there were several other hill-mass obstacles which had to be overcome. In the 16th Infantry zone of advance the two more formidable hill-masses were Djebel Mektir and Djebel Touta. These were amply surrounded by many other rocky fortress-like hills which hampered any prospective advance.

This hilly country was very well suited for defensive fighting, and the German troops defending the area were very familiar with this terrain. The hills were organized into strong mutually-supporting, defensive positions, well protected by mine-fields, direct fire weapons, mortars and artillery. The Germans enjoyed excellent observation. Advance was possible only by hard hill-to-hill fighting, and air or armored support were practically unknown to the front line units attacking in this hilly terrain.

It was the middle of April when we arrived in the "Northern Campaign" area and spring had advanced to the stages of early summer. The uniform was wool o.d. and in the daytime it became quite hot, but at night one became very cold even if he were fortunate enough to be wearing an overcoat. The rainy season had passed and the goat pastures on the more dry, higher hillsides were turning brown. In the valleys the grain in the fields was just starting to ripen, but it had not ripened enough for it to be set afire by white-phosphorus mortar or artillery shells. Some of these grain fields had so many bright red poppies blooming in them that they actually possessed a reddish cast. (7)

*Djebel is the Arabic for mount or mountain. (7) My own observations; A-5, p. 9-11; A-7.

ADVANCE OF THE FIRST BATTALION IN THE "NORTHERN CAMPAIGN"

On the evening of 22 April the First Battalion received the mission of siezing Djebel Tekla, a mountain located about three miles northeast of Sidi Rherib and the positions occupied by the First Battalion. Djebel Tekla was to be the jumping-off area for the Second and Third Battalion attack scheduled to take place the following morning, 23 April. (8)

During the night Djebel Tekla was occupied by the Third Platoon of "A" Company. At that time I was the Platoon Leader of this platoon. In order to occupy the hill we first had to drive off a German outguard located in the draw to the left of Djebel Tekla.

On the morning of 23 April, the remainder of "A" Company and the First Battalion moved up to Djebel Tekla. Then the Second and Third Battalions moved through the First Battalion and took Hills 415 and 374. (9)

The First Battalion moved through the Second and Third Battalions during the night of 23-24 April and on the morning of 24 April attacked Hills 469 and 491 on Djebel Berbidikr. While we were fighting for this odd H-shaped djebel, General McNair, CG Army Ground Forces, was wounded while observing this attack from the vicinity of Hill 415. (10)

After the First Battalion took Djebel Berbidikr the Germans withdrew from Djebel bou Achim* and the Second Battalion moved up during the night of 24-25 and occupied this hill. On 24 April a new artillery battalion had registered on Djebel bou Achim and without checking to see whether or not our own troops were on the hill, at about 0200 hrs. in the morning of 25 April fired several fire missions on this hill. This artillery was firing unobserved fire, and it was pathetic to see the flares for the emergency lifting of artillery fire go unheeded. The first few rounds knocked out the Second Battalion's wire and radio communication to regiment and by the time

(8) A-5, p. 14-15; A-7. (9) My own observations; A-5, p. 14-15; A-7.

(10) My own observations; A-7; A-4, p. 289-290. *Correct spelling unknown.

neighboring units had established communication with the erring artillery the damage had been done. The Second Battalion suffered very heavy casualties as a result of this "friendly" artillery fire. (11)

From 25 to 27 April the 16th Infantry was in Division reserve. On 26 April the First Battalion moved onto Djebel Mektir, with the Second and Third Battalions to the right of the First. On the 27th the First Battalion moved to the southern slopes of Djebel Touta. (12)

On the night of 28-29 April the First Battalion moved through the 26th Infantry on the north slopes of Djebel Touta and attacked Hill 531. Company "A" captured this hill but when dawn came on 29 April the enemy fire from Hill 455 denied us the forward slopes of Hill 531. (Tab D)

"C" Company was moved up in rear of 531 and "B" Company attacked Hill 455. "A" Company supported this attack from 531. "B" Company never did take the hill, and both "A" and "B" Companies were engaged in a heavy fire fight with the Germans on 455 for the rest of the day.

Evening of 29 April found "A" Company occupying a reverse slope defensive position on Hill 531. The First Platoon was on the left, the Second in the center, and the Third on the right flank and right rear. (13)

THE PLAN FOR THE ATTACK ON HILL 523

During the evening of 29 April Lt. Col. Charles J. Denholm, CO of the First Battalion, received orders to make a night attack on Hill 523. The information he received was that this was to be a general attack and that all the units along the line were to attack. (14)

For three days of bitter fighting the 34th Division had been attacking, unsuccessfully, Hill 609, and on the night of the 29th they were again given the mission of attacking Hill 609. To the right of the 16th Infantry, the 26th Infantry which had captured part of Djebel Touta was to

(11) My own observations; A-7. (12) My own observations; A-5, p. 14-15.

(13) My own observations; A-7. (14) A-7.

continue the attack and capture the remainder of that high ground. (15)

In the 16th Infantry sector the Third Battalion was assigned the mission of capturing Hill 455. The First Battalion was assigned the mission of penetrating the German lines between Hills 609 and 455, and fighting for neither of these two hills, to move on and capture Hill 523. This order assigning the First Battalion mission originated at higher headquarters and was protested by both Col. Denholm and the regimental commander, Colonel George A. Taylor (later Brig. Gen.), inasmuch as the success of this mission depended entirely upon the adjacent units successfully accomplishing their missions -- missions which they had been unable to accomplish for the past three days. However, these protests were of no avail and accordingly, H-hour was set at 0100 hrs. 30 April. (16)

At about 2000 hrs. on the night of 29 April the wire was out to the 3rd Platoon of Company "A", so a runner came to the platoon CP and told me the company commander, 1st. Lt. James Pence wanted to see me. The night was so dark that as I crawled over the rocks I had to follow the wire back in order to find the CP.

When I got to the CP Jim said to me, "523. You're the assault. Get your platoon here right away".

There were no questions. As I turned to go he said, "By the way, you made First".

After being told I was leading the assault, somehow or other I wasn't able to get up much enthusiasm about the news of my receiving a battlefield promotion.

When I brought the 3rd Platoon in from the right flank to the vicinity of the company CP, Col. Denholm gave Jim and me the details for the attack. The 1st and 2nd Platoons hadn't come in yet but Jim planned to give them the details later.

(15) A-5, p. 16-18. (16) A-7.

The formation for the battalion attack was to be "A" Company in the lead, followed by Companies "C", "B", and "D" in that order. The formation in "A" Company was the 3rd Platoon in the assault followed by the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Platoons.

With the 3rd Platoon I was to move down the forward slope we were on, Hill 531, and slip through the German lightly-held lines between Hills 609 and 455 at a point approximately equidistant from both. Then I was to head directly for the objective, Hill 523. During the day we had observed the Germans on Hill 523 and had also drawn fire from there, so we knew it was occupied in force.

The night was absolutely black for there were no stars or moon showing. We realized that a change in direction even as slight as this was difficult to make, so Col. Denholm made arrangements with the artillery liaison officer to have Hill 523 marked at 15 minute intervals with a WP (white phosphorus) shell. Also, Hill 523 was to have one HE (high-explosive) shell dropped on it once each 5 minutes and enough HE was to be dropped on neighboring hills to make all the firing appear to be nothing more than normal harassing fire.

The purpose of the artillery fire, although it did have a harassing effect, was to create enough noise and diversion to preserve the secrecy of our movement to Hill 523. A large wheat field occupied the lower flat areas between Hills 609, 523, 455, and 531. The wheat in this field was about waist high, and troops moving through the wheat would produce a characteristic rustling noise. Also, we hoped that an occasional HE round dropped into the wheat field would discourage German patrols from operating there.

When I reached the base of Hill 523 I was to immediately assault the hill and gain the top. If and when I ran into tough going, Jim planned to strengthen the 3rd Platoon attack with the 1st Platoon on the left and the 2nd Platoon on the right. "A" Company was to continue over the crest and occupy the center portion of the forward slope.

Speed was absolutely essential. We had to have the hill in our possession by dawn. To be caught in the open wheat field or on the slopes of the hill was to invite disaster, particularly so if Hill 455 still had any Germans on it at dawn. So, if "A" Company was held up for any appreciable length of time, Col. Denholm planned to commit both "B" and "C" Companies simultaneously on the two flanks of "A" Company.

This night attack, like all our night attacks, was to be a "bayonet" attack. In all these night attacks higher headquarters ordered us to attack with bayonets fixed, but actually all the killing we did was with "Tommy gun"* fire, rifle fire, and fragmentation grenades. It would have been just as logical to call this "bayonet" attack a "razor" attack. We carried both. Both were potential weapons. However, in all my fighting I never saw anyone killed with a bayonet nor have I been able to meet one single person who will state he was eye-witness to a bayoneting. Yet the official War Department account of our capture of Hill 523 states: "the hill fell to a bayonet charge". (17)

THE ATTACK ON HILL 523**

The jump-off of the First Battalion at 0100 hrs. 30 April, the scheduled H-hour, was not made until about 0130 hrs. Company "B" had difficulty disengaging the enemy on Hill 455 and in reaching the battalion assembly area in rear of the Company "A" positions on Hill 531. In addition, ammunition, water, and ration resupply was late in coming up to the forward positions. In Company "A" the ammunition supply was complete, but each man received only one canteen cup of water and 1/3 of a C-ration.

I originally planned to jump-off in the formation of two squads forward, the remaining squad in rear, and each squad in squad column with

*Thompson sub-machine gun, caliber .45. (17) My own observations; A-5, p. 21; A-7; A-8. **This section of the monograph is based upon the following sources: my own observations; A-7; A-8; A-9.

the distance between men to be the limit of visibility. However, the night was so dark by the time we jumped-off that the limit of visibility was only about one arm's-length, and the formation actually was a column of twos with scouts and flank guards out a distance of one arm's-length. About 5 or 6 men in the platoon were armed with Tommy guns. I moved these men to the head of the column and made sure they had at least four fragmentation grenades. The riflemen had their bayonets fixed, and their pieces with the chambers empty were loaded and locked. No accidental shot was going to tip off the Germans we were coming.

Control was difficult to say the least. Soon after jumping-off it became evident that darkness prevented any really efficient use of the flank guards but I kept them out nevertheless. It was necessary for the two scouts to operate actually at the head of the column in order for me to control them. At frequent intervals word was passed up to me from the rear of the column to halt and allow the rear to catch up.

The night was so dark there were no stars, moon, or landmarks of any type visible. Control became so difficult that to make sure I was on the right azimuth and that I was not moving too fast for the remainder of the column, I ordered the scouts to move only five paces and halt. Then I would check the azimuth and the column following. If everything was OK I signaled the #2 scout to proceed another 5 paces by giving him a tap on the shoulder. If we had moved too rapidly, I waited for the tap on the shoulder, the signal passed up from the rear that everything was OK behind. The dark night, heavy equipment, and rough uneven ground was giving the rear of the column so much trouble that such halts came about every five minutes. When we halted we got down on one or both knees so that only our heads stuck up above the wheat in the field.

During one such halt the scouts called my attention to a rustling sound approaching from the left front. The "go ahead" tap I received on the shoulder went ignored. Several Tommy guns were pointed to the dir-

ection of the sound. Slowly a four man German patrol crossed directly in front of us not more than three paces away. Had they turned to the right they would have discovered our column. And met their death. And destroyed our element of surprise.

The Germans passed on without noticing us, and I received the second and third tap on the shoulder. I estimated that we were now at a point just inside the German lines equidistant from Hills 609 and 455. The thought entered my mind that the Germans who crossed in front of us were possibly a relief outguard and not a patrol. Apparently we were now within the German lines and we hadn't yet been discovered.

As we moved out, the artillery dropped the first WP shell on Hill 523. 523 was dead ahead. It was reassuring to know that thus far our direction was absolutely correct. Now the whole column could guide on the WP and I would be relieved of the task of constantly checking the azimuth.

A dog started barking from the direction of the left slope of 523. Another joined in from the rear of 609; then a couple of German flares went up. Now three dogs were barking. As the flares died away, the dogs were still barking. Several HE shells landed on 609 and 545. The dogs were quiet. Now a machine gun fired a couple of quick bursts from 523. Still not too much to worry about. It sounded like some Kraut-head had an itchy trigger finger.

Next "Baron von Chandelier" came flying over in his two-engined plane just as he did each previous night of the "Northern Campaign". But this time he dropped his blinding flares over 531 and 455 instead of over some rear installation as was his custom. Then he circled and dumped quite a few of his "butterfly" anti-personnel bombs.

Most of the "butterfly" bombs landed harmlessly in the wheat field to the left of Hill 455. Some landed on the German positions on 455. Others hit the rear of our First Battalion column in the "D" Company area as they were coming down the forward slopes of Hill 531.

The noise of men running from the bombs, the thump of men with heavy equipment hitting the dirt, the cries for medics -- all of these could be heard at the head of the column; yet the Germans didn't appear to be alerted.

The dog on 523 started barking again, and never let up for the rest of the night. Several German flares were in the air, but these appeared to be the normal flares they fired each night. There was still no firing, and we hadn't run into any mines or barbed wire. The base of Hill 523 was just ahead.

At the base of 523 I halted momentarily and brought the third squad up on line, and had the squads move laterally to about a 10 yard interval. The center squad was base squad. Then the Third Platoon silently started up the hill. The assault was on!

When we left the wheat field at the base, I noticed what at first appeared to be a huge boulder at the base of the hill. Closer observation showed that the whole hill was a mass of solid rock. It soon became evident that the Arabic name on the map for Hill 523, Rock of Chekak, was indeed fitting and proper. We were in for really tough going if we were forced to halt and had to dig in. We had advanced only a few yards when the hill became so steep that we could move forward only by the use of all fours. I thought I heard a dog growl so I moved two men with their Tommy guns out to the flanks on line with the scouts.

As Private Miller, the lead scout of the center squad, was crawling forward, he was challenged by a low guttural voice in a language he recognized as German. Then Miller, who spoke German, put his wits to work thinking of a proper reply, but in the meantime the German sentry threw a grenade over our heads and started yelling at the top of his lungs to someone in the direction of the top of the hill and a machine gun beside the sentry opened up. Miller interpreted the yelling to be a warning that we were overrunning the sentry's position, and it didn't take Miller long

to act, even though he was a new replacement and this was his first introduction to combat. He pulled the pin of grenade #1 and heaved it in the direction of the sentry. The same for grenade #2. The same for grenade #3. The two men on Miller's flanks opened up on the machine gun with their Tommy guns.

But the damage had been done. In those few split seconds it took Miller to try to think of a reply, then to pull the pin, to throw the grenade, and for the grenade to explode, the Kraut-head sentry was able to warn of our advance. The German machine gun's firing and the American Tommy guns' reply confirmed the sentry's warning for the Germans.

Immediately the base of the hill received about 30 mortar rounds. Company "A" caught most of them. Among the wounded were the platoon leader, Lt. Zyblut and the platoon sergeant, S/Sgt. Wojewacki, of the Second Platoon. Lt. Zyblut had received a battlefield commission only about a week previously. After the initial concentration of mortar fire, additional rounds were dropped out in the wheat field as well as on the slopes of 523.

Then some machine guns directly in front of the 3rd Platoon opened up. We could see four guns firing from positions about 50 yards ahead of us and they appeared to be near the geographical crest of 523. Two were forward, and two were echeloned to the rear of the two forward ones. The bulk of the Battalion column - Companies "A", "B", and most of "C" - was close enough to 523 to be in defilade from the fire of those four guns plus others we hadn't located. However "D" Company was having a rough time. From my position they seemed to be absorbing all the slugs those guns were throwing out.

The three squads of the Third Platoon kept pushing forward towards the German guns firing directly from our front. The two forward guns were directly on line with the center and right squads. I sent a message to the left squad leader to continue against the left machine gun located in rear of the forward two guns. For the time being we couldn't attack the right rear machine gun. The guns were still firing over our heads at the

column in rear of us at the base of the hill.

As we advanced on the guns, we had to come up out of defilade into the gun's fields of fire. As we got closer we could hear a dog growling from the gun position. Apparently it wasn't a well-disciplined sentry dog, but just the same it was quite unnerving to be crawling up to that position when you knew the dog was growling a warning of your approach. The German gunners started firing at us. I was directly in back of Miller when I heard the characteristic "thoomp" a slug makes when it hits a man's body. The "thoomp" came from one of the riflemen of the center squad in back of me.

Then came a second "thoomp". At this point I got mad and without thinking did about the most foolish thing I have ever done in my life. I stood up and fired a whole magazine of carbine ammunition at the machine gun. In those early days of the war we were extremely short of certain types of ammunition. Carbine ammunition was one of these types and each carbine was allowed only two magazines of ammunition. Later I was to pay for this foolish firing.

No, my firing at the machine gun didn't knock it out. In fact it drew fire from the machine gun. Then Miller crawled forward and silenced the gun with a hand grenade.

Just about the time Miller was heaving his last grenade at the machine gun, there arose from the base of the hill the God-awfullest yelling, bellowing, screeching and blood-curdling hollering I ever heard. The goose pimples the machine guns gave me sprouted new ones all over again until I realized this noise rending the air came from our own Battalion. The First Battalion was assaulting the whole hill!

Jim Pence and Lt. Quentin Murdock, platoon leader of the First Platoon, came by me screaming and yelling leading the rest of "A" Company past the Third Platoon so fast I had all I could do to get the men up and charging in time to keep in sight of the rest of the company.

The German gunners, seven in number, on the guns in front of the Third Platoon jumped up with their hands in the air yelling "Kamerad" and surrendered.

All the machine guns on the crest of the hill stopped firing, although mortar fire continued to fall. Night was beginning to fall away. Dawn was just about ready to break. The charging battalion had reached the crest of the hill.

While the Third Platoon of Company "A" had been working up the hill against the German machine guns, Col. Denholm assembled his three rifle company commanders -- Capt. Pence (he received a battlefield promotion the same time I did but didn't tell me of his promotion when he told me of mine) of "A" Company, and Lts. Berry and Sherman of "B" and "C" Companies respectively -- and gave them his plan for committing them to the assault of the hill.

"B" Company was to move up on the left of "A" Company and assault the left third of the hill, "A" Company, the base company, would assault the center third, and "C" Company was to move up on the right of "A" Company and assault the right third of the hill. On his signal the whole battalion less "D" Company and the Third Platoon of "A" Company which was already fighting, would assault the hill.

The assault started on Col. Denholm's signal and he moved out with "B" Company; thus the assault had started behind me, and actually had carried the hill almost "before I got my glasses off".

With the three rifle companies on the crest of Hill 523 at dawn, there still was some fighting to do before the hill was ours. On the left "B" Company pushed onto the forward slope as far as they could until they were stopped by heavy mortar and machine gun fire. Most of the machine gun fire seemed to be coming from the vicinity of an Arab hut on the slope of the hill. "B" Company joined "A" Company on the right and bent around the left to the rear to protect the battalion left flank. At the most, this position extended forward about 100 yards down the forward crest of the hill.

To the right of "A" Company, "C" Company was having difficulty in securing the right flank of the hill. They had over-run the German positions on Hill 523, but fire from Hill 545 made their positions almost untenable. A deep crevice so wide it could not be crossed separated the two hills, and thus "C" Company could not get onto 545 to relieve the almost unbearable pressure. Inasmuch as this was worst on the forward slopes of 523, most of the company was kept behind on the more protected rear slope.

In the center "A" Company was met by heavy machine gun fire coming from reverse slope positions as they advanced over the crest of the hill. On this rocky hill the guns were not dug in, as this was impossible, but instead occupied stone cairn-like structures.

As the Third Platoon came over the ridge, one of these cairn-protected machine guns opened up on the platoon. S/Sgt. Alder, the platoon sergeant, charged this gun position firing one magazine after another from his Tommy gun. His aggressive action silenced the gun. Several other machine gun-harboring cairns were reduced in the same way by other men in the company in the platoon zones of action.

As "A" Company reached the military crest on the forward slope, mortar and artillery fire became so heavy they were forced to take cover immediately in their in-place defensive positions. Men sought in the open built rock cairns as best they could. The majority took cover in the many crevices which were on the hill. These were not the best of defensive positions.

Typical of the crevices on the hill was the one I found in the center of the Third Platoon area which formed a good foxhole. The crevice was about 6 feet wide but bottomless as far as I could see. However, in one part of the crevice about 5 feet from the top, a large boulder about 10 feet long had lodged. This boulder formed the bottom of an excellent 5 foot deep foxhole. The heavy artillery and mortar firing caught Jim Pence near my CP so he joined me, as did Sgt. Boyle, squad leader of the center

squad. Also in the hole was Private Stewart, the platoon runner. The fire was so heavy none of us could move out of the hole, but we had good observation of the whole company front.

Thus dawn of 30 April found that the First Battalion was in possession of Hill 523 and had accomplished the mission assigned to it the night before. The three rifle companies occupied the forward and flank slopes of the hill. The weapons company had been so disorganized by the bombing, mortar and machine gun fire that it was still moving forward in the wheat field but had not yet gotten onto the hill. Wire communication from 523 to 531 was continually being knocked out as soon as it was established. The entire battalion was receiving extremely heavy mortar and artillery fire.

THE GERMAN COUNTERATTACK OF HILL 523*

Dawn of 30 April found the 34th Division still on Hill 490 as its efforts to capture Hill 609 had again been repulsed. In the First Division zone of action, the Third Battalion 16th Infantry failed to take Hill 455 during the night, and the 26th Infantry did not advance any on Djebel Touta. Thus the First Battalion 16th Infantry found itself occupying a hill about one mile in enemy territory with Germans in front of them, on their flanks, and in their rear.

During the night of 29-30 April, the German defenses all along the line had held off all American attacks except the one made by the First Battalion, and which had yielded to this battalion Hill 523. Accordingly, the Germans counterattacked at dawn on the morning of 30 April.

The Germans had successfully repelled the attacks on 609 and 455 and from these two hills had complete control of the First Battalion's axis of communication. Wire was laid as the battalion advanced and wire

*This section of the monograph is based upon the following sources: my own observations; A-7; A-8; A-9.

crews working from both 531 and 523 were never able to successfully install wire communication. Mortar and artillery fire blew out the wire, and machine gunners on the slopes of 609 and 455 picked off the wiremen as they attempted to repair the line.

German mortar and artillery fire continued to be extremely heavy on 523. This fire was accurately adjusted from Hills 545 and 609, both of which literally "looked down on" Hill 523. This dawn artillery fire wounded both the forward observer and the liaison officer from the Battalion's supporting artillery. Then the fire destroyed both of these parties' radios. Next the battalion commander's radio set was destroyed and the operator wounded. Except for runner all communication was now cut off. During the morning one or two runners actually did manage to sneak through the wheat field back to the rear CP on 531.

From positions on the east and southeast slopes of Hill 609, and from Hill 455, the Germans started firing HE direct-fire from anti-tank guns. This direct fire proved far more devastating than the mortar or artillery fire. One AT gun from 455 was firing directly into the battalion CP on the reverse slope of 523. Machine guns firing from 455 and 545 could cover every inch of 523 with fire.

German infantry reserves from the rear of 609 made the counter-attack and hit the battalion on the left flank in the "B" Company area. They were supported, in addition to all their other fire, by a captured American half-track carrying a 75mm gun which was hidden in the Arab hut on the left flank of 523. The Germans had knocked out the back end of the hut and would fire through the front and side windows and doors. This direct fire had particularly devastating effect upon the left flank platoon of "B" Company. Except for one runner who was delivering a message to the Company CO, every man in this platoon was killed, including Lt. Cochran the platoon leader.

With the over-running of this left flank platoon, there developed one of the fiercest hand-to-hand battles of the war. Some men fought until all their ammunition was expended, then surrendered. Others continued to fight, even with their ammunition gone, until they themselves were killed. And, to preserve the accuracy of this monograph, the statement must be made that a few men surrendered when they could have fought on longer.

The German attack moved along the reverse slope of 523 over-running the Battalion CP and that portion of "C" Company on the reverse slope. With the reverse slope of the hill in their possession, the Germans turned and attacked Company "A" and the remainder of Companies "B" and "C" from the rear.

In the Company "A" area, the heavy artillery and mortar pounding we got when we started to occupy our positions never let up. From our positions in the crevice Jim and I could observe all of the Company front but the heavy fire would not let us move about. Because of the fact that there were no enemy in front of us and our flanks were secure, we didn't suspect that the heavy fire was supporting a German counterattack from some other direction.

With the coming of daylight Sgt. Boyle and I noticed large numbers of men moving around quite freely on the high rocks of Hill 545. At first we thought they were Americans, but when I observed them through my field glasses, I recognized them as Germans wearing parachute type helmets.

They were out of carbine range, so I borrowed Stewart's rifle and Sgt. Boyle and I started firing at these Germans. There was no way of finding out if we hit any, but some of those Germans hit the dirt pretty fast. They usually appeared in groups of 3 or 4. Each of us would fire several rounds and then no more would appear for about 5 or 10 minutes. After firing about a dozen rounds I returned Stewart's rifle and he took over.

Sgt. Boyle and Stewart kept up this firing until they were down to their last clip of M-1 ammunition, when Private Thrasher, the BAR man in a crevice about 20 yards to the right of me shouted, "Look, Lieutenant, look".

I looked all around but I didn't see anything unusual other than another nice target in the form of a group of about 4 Germans up amongst the rocks of 545. Then Thrasher shouted again, "Lieutenant, them's Americans. Americans and they're prisoners of the Germans".

I started to crawl over towards Thrasher and as I got near his crevice I could see the right flank of the "C" Company area and the deep cliff-like slope and cut separating 523 from 545. Marching along the edge of this cliff down the forward slope of 523 was a group of several German guards with about a dozen American soldiers prisoners, some of them wounded. As I crawled back Thrasher shouted, "Lieutenant, there's another bunch. They got the Colonel".

This was our first indication other than the all-morning-long heavy mortar and artillery fire, that things weren't going quite right. Off to the left front from the "B" Company area another group of prisoners was marched down the hill; then they turned about 500 yards in front of our position and moved across our front to the rear of Hill 545.

Suddenly something happened; some change took place. For a second or two I didn't recognize the quick change. Then I realized the artillery and mortar pounding we were taking had stopped.

Thrasher started firing his BAR. Throughout the company area rifle fire broke out. From the direction of the crest of the hill Germans could be seen darting, running, crawling towards us. They were also closing in from the flanks.

This advance cost the Germans a terrific price. Knock them down, but others still seemed to move forward. "A" Company kept them at or near the crest and flanks of the hill for well over an hour -- long enough for us to use up practically all our ammunition.

Then we didn't see many Germans, finally none at all. I was just about ready to take a quick breath of relief when we had the "boom lowered on us". We got a mortar and artillery concentration which was the worst I received in the war -- before or after, including 3 assault landings and 4 campaigns.

The Germans were right in upon us when this last artillery and mortar fire stopped. They were shouting, "Hunds upp, hunds upp". It wasn't until I heard this several times that I realized they were calling to surrender and meant, "Hands up". Sgt. Boyle and Stewart used up the last of their ammunition. Now I was going to pay for foolishly wasting a whole magazine, one-half of my ammunition supply, the night before firing at a machine gun.

I nursed along my carbine ammunition as best I could by firing only at the close range Germans. Jim is a good pistol shot, but his banging away with his .45 didn't seem to be holding many off.

Suddenly a German crossed in front of me only 15 yards away. He was in a crouched position, carrying a light machine gun as if in a position to fire from the hip. He had belts of ammunition draped across his shoulders and around his waist. At this point someone in the crevice fired at another target, and this German turned to face the source of the shot.

I had difficulty locating this Kraut-head in my sights. He was so big and so close it seemed I was rotating my carbine 180 degrees before it moved through the area describing his grey-green camouflage uniform.

He fell with the first shot I fired at him, but when I squeezed the trigger again, the hammer fell on a firing pin which struck an empty chamber. I had fired my last round.

I turned to Jim and he said, "Dave, they have us".

The two Germans closed in on the crevice. They had potato-masher grenades, the porcelain rings and firing strings wrapped around their fingers all set to toss the grenades in upon us.

All four of us hopped out of the crevice. We were prisoners of the Germans.

When the Germans mopped up what remained of Company "A" all organized resistance from Hill 523 ended. The Germans had captured 11 officers and 156 men from the First Battalion, including the battalion commander and three company commanders. The fourth company commander was killed. The Battalion had 127 officers and men killed on the hill. I have no statistics on those wounded as those wounded during the night were evacuated while those wounded after dawn were captured.

"D" Company never got on the hill. Dawn found them in the wheat field so they dug in where they were. Later in the day some moved forward to the base of 523 and dug in there and from this position they were able to deny some of the forward slopes of 523 to the Germans, but this moving forward was done after the German counterattack had passed by. The "D" Company mortars never did get into position to do any effective firing.

On 30 April one platoon of tanks was attached to the 16th Infantry and with these in support, they again attacked Hill 455. The three tanks were knocked out by German AT guns firing from positions on the east and southeast slopes of 609. During the remainder of the day the regiment continued their efforts to take Hill 455, but they were never able to take this hill or to penetrate the 609-455 line through which the First Battalion had passed during the night.

On 1 May the 34th Division after 5 days of extremely hard and bitter fighting captured Hill 609. This was the key terrain feature of the whole area, and when 609 fell the Germans withdrew all along the line.

The Americans who were captured were placed on a prison ship at Tunis about a week later. As the ship was moving along the northern shore of Cape Bon it was bombed and sunk by American planes. By the grace of God this ship was sunk in shallow water so that the upper portion of the ship remained above water. The crew and guards abandoned the ship.

During the night several Frenchmen from Tunis ferried the remaining men off the ship in small "putt-putt" motor boats. As the men were slipping past the Germans through the city of Tunis they were met by forward elements of the British Eighth Army. The next day all effective resistance except that on Cape Bon had stopped, and two days later, 13 May 1943, all Axis forces had surrendered. Two months later the First Battalion 16th Infantry was assaulting the shores of Sicily.

For its fight on Hill 523, the First Battalion was cited in general orders and thus won the Distinguished-Unit Badge*.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The capture of Hill 523 by the First Battalion is an excellent example of how the aggressive spirit of an organization will enable it to accomplish difficult missions even when other units fail to accomplish theirs. However, once a mission is assigned to a unit, that unit must accomplish that mission within the time allotted to it.

When the assigned mission is not accomplished others may be forced to pay for the failure. In this case the First Battalion was removed as a fighting unit for the remainder of the Tunisian Campaign simply because units adjacent to it failed to accomplish their missions on time.

Had Hill 609 and Hill 455 been captured the same night the First Battalion captured Hill 523, I am certain no counterattack could have even been launched let alone succeeded against Hill 523. For the failure of the adjacent units to seize their objectives, one regimental commander and five battalion commanders were relieved of their commands. However this relief from command was, for the commanders concerned, a pittance to pay compared with that paid by the men killed, wounded, or captured on Hill 523.

*Frequently but erroneously called "Presidential Unit Citation"; A-2; A-6.

Should any question be raised concerning the fighting ability of the First Battalion I wish to point out that this battalion was cited in general orders thereby entitling it to the Distinguished-Unit Badge for its capture of Hill 523. That was the last day of combat for the battalion in the Tunisian Campaign. Within two weeks all those who were captured either escaped or were liberated and rejoined the battalion. Two months later this battalion under the same battalion and company commanders assaulted the beach at Sicily and on this very next day of combat following 523 was again cited in general orders and thus won the Bronze Oak-Leaf Cluster to the Distinguished-Unit Badge.

LESSONS LEARNED

Among the lessons learned as a result of this attack are the following:

1. The night attack is an excellent form of attack to use when the enemy occupies well prepared defensive positions. The objective must be limited, and careful planning and reconnaissance are necessary.
2. In the night attack an objective difficult to locate can be marked by white phosphorus shells fired on the objective by the artillery.
3. Prearranged plans should be used whenever possible as these do much towards reducing the confusion of battle, and this is particularly important in the night attack.
4. Aggressive leadership is necessary for any type of attack to succeed and for the night attack it is essential that there be aggressive leadership displayed in all units from the smallest to the largest.
5. All missions regardless of their degree of difficulty when once assigned to a unit must be accomplished by that unit on schedule.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A-1 Time Magazine, 10 May 1943.
- A-2 General Order #29, The First Division, 6 July 1944.
- A-3 The War in North Africa, Part 2, United States Military Academy, November 1944.
- A-4 My Three Years with Eisenhower, Captain Harry C. Butcher USNR, 1946.
- A-5 To Bizerte with the II Corps, Military Intelligence Division, War Department, November 1943.
- A-6 General Order #30, The First Division, 7 July 1944.
- A-7 Statement of Author.

Through the study of the various references available concerning the capture of Hill 523 I have observed that much of that which has been written is in error. Many statements in these references are at variance with statements made by me in this monograph. Where such difference occurs, I believe that I am correct and that the references are incorrect. I was on the ground. I took part in the action.

One example which is typical of the errors encountered is that in Time Magazine for 10 May 1943, page 26. Here Hill 523 is erroneously called Hill 532, and Colonel Denholm, identified by his loss of a tooth at El Guettar and not by name, is given credit with leading platoons of "B" Company while commanding the Third Battalion.

An example of a gross error is the account of the attack as shown on pages 21 & 22 of the book "To Bizerte with the II Corps" which is an official War Department publication. Units, dates, and hills are incorrectly listed.

In support of my statements are the following extracts from letters I received from Colonel Charles J. Denholm and Major Robert A. Cullis, who were the battalion commander and battalion executive officer respectively at the time of the attack on Hill 523:

Quarters 272, West Point, N. Y., 4 Nov 46

Dear Milotta,

As I remember it you are correct in saying the battalion led by A Company took 531 and that B Company then unsuccessfully attempted to take 455. A, B, C, D, and a forward Bn CP were located on 531. No more could be brought forward as practically all of 531 was under direct enemy observation. The battalion received orders to make a night penetration between hills 609 and 455. We were to fight for neither hill and by sneaking through the gap have the whole Bn on 523 in the (prior to) morning. This order was protested by Bn. and Regt. it having originated in division. The 34th was to attack on our left and take 609. Another Bn of our regiment was to take 455. The 34th did not take 609. Hill 455 was only partially taken by the other Bn. Our Bn accomplished its mission. We found ourselves surrounded on all sides by the Germans. Actually messengers and some ammunition bearers on foot succeeded in going between 523 and 531 because of the partial

clearing of 455 and the tall grain on the flatland. During the day regiment lost several tanks and launched several unsuccessful attacks trying to get to us. They never penetrated the opening between 531 and 455 we had gone through during the dark. On 523 A, B, and C Company formed a circular defense. D Company got lost and dug in along the foot of 523. The Germans killed about a third of the Bn on the hill and captured about a third. D Company and quite a few stragglers never moved or were molested in particular. Or did much good. They were still there when someone did get through so technically the Bn never lost the hill.

/s/ Charles

Hq. 16th Inf., 22 Nov 46 (postmarked, not dated)

Dear Dave,

I went out there (Hill 523)* about 1100 that night (30 April 43) and the place was deserted except for the bodies - 127 bodies removed from the hill the next day, 1 May. ***** 455 was the mission of our (16 Inf) Third Battalion. They didn't move beyond the east slope of 531 and that is why we caught hell from that direction.

They (3rd Bn)* never moved and the 26th (Infantry)* on our right never moved - the 34th Division never moved. It left the First Battalion out on the proverbial limb -- there was no excuse for anyone not moving. ***** The CO of the assault regiment in the 34th was relieved plus all three Bn commanders. Two Bn COs of the 26th were relieved at the same time. ***** I hope this clears up a few points for you. I (discussed)* - all this with General Butler who later commanded the 135th Infantry and then the 34th Division and I feel it is reasonably accurate.

/s/ Bob

*Added, does not appear in the original.

A-8 Infantry Journal, "Patrol Formations in North Africa" by Lt. David E. Milotta, January 1944.

A-9 Infantry Journal, "Ten Days A Nazi Prisoner" by Lieutenant X (David E. Milotta), Part I May 1944 and Part II June 1944.

Tab A Map, Tunisia. 1:2,000,000.

Tab B Map, II Corps Planned Zone of Advance. Approximately 1:1,000,000.

Tab C Map, Sidi Rherib-Sidi Nsir-Hill 609-Hill 523 Area. 1:50,000.

Tab D Map, Hill 523-Hill 609 Area. Approximately 1:10,000.